

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Assessing the Need for a Mobile Police Substation in Midland

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ABSTRACT

The Midland Police Department, in an effort to be more responsive to the various neighborhoods within our community, is considering the possible use of a Mobile Substation. This proposal is being done to assist in determining if this is a viable concept within our city. Input has been solicited from citizens, business and community leaders, city management and from within the department itself. Published material on the subject of substations and storefronts has been researched as has various police journals, and policing associations. Other departments that have been involved in the use of mobile substations have been contacted and asked to share their experiences and advice. After conducting this research and soliciting input from many varied sources it was determined that the use of a mobile substation could be a positive way to interact with the community and to further our commitment to improve the quality of life through a community partnership. This type of unit can also be used to assist the local beat officers in attacking specific problems within their areas of responsibility.

Introduction:

The purpose of this research is to assess the need for the creation of a mobile police substation by the Midland Police Department for use within our community.

The department has been asked to provide storefronts or substations in the past and we have attempted to staff at least two different storefronts. We have faced several problems on each attempt. Our primary problem has always been inadequate staffing. The department has not been able to maintain adequate personnel to insure minimum staffing to cover the regular patrol beats, much less cover other staffing requests. As a result, the storefronts of the past have not been as successful as we would have liked. Even with the help of our Citizen's Police Academy Alumni Association members who volunteered many hours to help with the staffing, we were still not able to provide the staffing at the Midland Park Mall storefront that was needed. We felt that this was causing a negative perception with the public because they often saw an empty office. There is still support for the idea of storefronts' or substations; both within the community and the police department, however, our previous experience has indicated that fixed storefronts would not be a wise use of our limited resources. Because of this, more information is needed to ascertain if there is a legitimate need for a mobile substation within the city.

Since the department has now received funding for four additional officers under the COPS AHEAD Program and since these officers must be involved in community policing projects, it has been suggested that this would be the opportune time to consider the possible staffing of a mobile substation.

Input will be solicited from local citizens, business leaders, and police department personnel, in an effort to determine the overall feasibility of such an operation. A search of several areas has been made in an attempt to find information concerning the use of mobile police substations or ministations. Various police journals, the International Association of Chief's of Police electronic network, the Community Policing Consortium, and other police agencies will be used as additional sources of information in researching this issue. Other agencies will also be contacted to solicit their input as to how they determined their needs and how they staffed their mobile units.

The intended outcome of this paper is to present a body of information that can be used to make an informed decision concerning our involvement in the use of a mobile substation as a part of our current Community Oriented/ Problem Oriented Policing philosophy (COP/POP).

This research is intended primarily for the use of the command staff of the Midland Police Department. However, other departments of similar size and configuration which are considering implementing a mobile substation type operation may find this research useful.

Historical Context:

The Midland Police Department has been involved with the philosophy of COP/POP for at least six years. The department has provided training to most of the sworn personnel in the department; concerning this philosophy, and it has even been incorporated into our department's mission statement. There have been several COP and

POP projects that have been initiated by various officers in the department with varying degrees of success. These projects have included projects such as; opening a storefront at a local mall; helping neighborhoods clean up vacant lots; establishing a temporary storefront in an apartment complex; assisting neighborhood residents in getting a vacated rundown apartment complex demolished; and assisting a neighborhood that was experiencing various problems with juveniles from outside the neighborhood who were attending a local junior high school. One of our officers has been actively involved in presenting a landlord training program that targets keeping illegal activity out of rental property. These projects all point to the acceptance of the COP/POP philosophy by a large portion of our officers. While we realize that not every officer subscribes to COP/POP, we have seen an increasing number of them express interest in using COP/POP in addressing problem areas within their respective beats. Because of differences within our community and our department, we must strive to formulate a plan that will best serve both.

"In a society as diverse as ours, there are bound to be different priorities placed on police by different people who live in different communities. In addition, police officers are not all the same, do not have similar opinions or expectations, do not perform at the same level, and do not operate with the same style. In fact, police departments may operate under a number of separate philosophies. These differences influence the policies that allocate resources and, ultimately, determine how a police department and its officers should police the neighborhoods in which they work" (Alpert and Dunham 1988).

Review of literature and Practice:

The need for exploring ways to improve how the police and community relate can be seen in much of the literature of past years. This is evidenced by the following quotations. - - -

"The need for strengthening police relationships with the communities they serve is critical today in the Nation's large cities and in many small cities and towns as well" (Cromwell and Keefer 1973).

This was also discussed in the classic police sourcebook Local Government Police Management.

"At the core of this orientation is the recognition that joint police-community effort is the most fruitful approach to combating crime and the fear of crime, given both the nature of crime and the limitations on police resources. Community policing promises to address a wide range of social and physical problems that contribute to neighborhood crime and fear of crime. Furthermore, it promises to mobilize numerous individuals and agencies in this effort. Another manifestation of community policing is the effort to decentralize the police service delivery system and bring police officers closer to the community they serve" (Geller 1991).

This need continues to be an important element of how we police our communities today.

COP and POP are two of the ways that we can forge a stronger partnership with the community in which we live and work.

"The present trend in law enforcement is toward community policing, a re-emergence of a past philosophy for conducting police work. The return of this concept is at least partially based upon research findings showing that when the police get back into the community, identify problems, and implement community-based changes through pro-active approaches, they can significantly reduce crime in a neighborhood" (Hopper, 1995).

In reviewing how other agencies assessed their need for storefronts or substations, it was found that these were primarily fixed locations used to address the issue of forging stronger relationships with the citizens of the individual neighborhoods. While this is the most accepted use of the storefront/substation concept, it may not be the only way to make the concept work in an area that has experienced previous problems with the fixed type of operation.

"Community policing must be tailored to the needs and the resources of the local jurisdictions--there is simply no way to provide hard and fast rules that can cover all circumstances" (Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux 1994).

Mobile storefronts or substations are another way to address this issue. There have been a limited number of departments around the country that have used this approach. In researching this subject I found that the following agencies have used a mobile substation in some manner: North Las Vegas, Nevada Police Department, Austin, Texas P.D., Waukegan, Illinois P.D., Colorado Springs, Colorado P.D., Reno, Nevada P.D., San Joaquin County, California Sheriff's Office and Bay town, Texas P.D..

In a telephone interview with Lt. Vaden of the North Las Vegas, Nevada Police Department, it was learned that a 38-foot motor home had been used as a substation for approximately two years. The department had not been satisfied with the response received from the neighborhoods that were targeted. He stated that it was used strictly as a patrol substation and other units did not work out of it with the patrol officers. The initial plan was for the unit to go into a neighborhood and have the patrol officers do extensive foot patrol in the neighborhood in an effort to get the officers back in contact with the citizens. Lt. Vaden felt that the mobile substation was not a successful venture in North Las Vegas.

I also interviewed Sgt. Bob Driscoll of the Colorado Springs, Colorado P.O. who is in charge of the Neighborhood Policing Unit (NPU). This unit uses the department's mobile command post as a mobile storefront. According to Sgt. Driscoll,

"The assigned officers serve as a primary source of crime prevention, target hardening, and general public safety information to citizens. In conjunction with other uniformed officers they act as community problem-solvers; identifying, analyzing the

causes and contributing factors, and devising and implementing solutions to a myriad of neighborhood problems. In addition, they provide general police services to the community through highly visible non-traditional patrol techniques such as foot and bicycle patrol (Driscoll 1996).

Sgt. Driscoll felt that the NPU was making a difference in the neighborhoods that they serve. His main concern was that the NPU officers are also the departments DARE officers and there are times that they are not able to be in the neighborhoods as much as they need to be.

Captain Gary Cochran of the Bay town, Texas P.D. was also interviewed and he is very pleased with the 10' x 40' trailer that his department uses as a mobile substation. This unit is towed to preselected pad sites throughout the city by a diesel truck. The unit is under the command of the Community Services Bureau. Capt. Cochran believes that the substation can enhance the department's ability to deal with a variety of issues, including those not directly related to fighting crime. An article in COUNTERATTACK; the newsletter of Associated Texans Against Crime, describes one such use of the substation as follows:

"A vibrant drug trade had developed around the five apartment complexes (with 1,200 units) on Northwood. Bay town police wanted to squelch the drug traffic and related crime.

Before bringing in the trailer, undercover police made an assessment of the area, identified suspects and made a number of arrests.

When the drug dealers were out, Bay town police brought the trailer in. Once in place, the trailer served as more than a police station on wheels. The unit also served as a convenient source of community services. Counselors from the local women's shelter worked from the trailer, as did representatives from the housing authority and county and city health departments. .. The mobile police unit camped on Northwood for two weeks. During that period, according to Capt. Cochran, people ventured outside after dark for the first time in years. Meanwhile crime was reduced, community services were provided, neighborhood watches established, and the community and their police force learned a lot about each other" (COUNTERATTACK 1996).

While the mobile unit does not always stay in one given area, it is still possible to have a police presence in the targeted neighborhood for a predetermined length of time. The length of time will naturally be dependant upon the types of problems that will be dealt with while the unit is located in that neighborhood. Capt. Cochran stated that he had to get approval of several pad sites throughout the city in order to have a place to park the trailer. Each of these pad sites had to have electricity, water and sewer connections installed. He was able to obtain assistance with funding for these pad sites through Federal grant monies.

Lt. Ken Bunker of the Reno, Nevada Police Department was interviewed and he stated that their department had purchased a 36 foot long vehicle that serves as both a mobile command post and as a mobile neighborhood substation. This unit was originally placed under the supervision of the Community Affairs Division. The original plan called for the vehicle to be used for routine field use as a neighborhood substation that would be staffed by both the Patrol Division and the Community Affairs Division however no particular officers were assigned to the unit. It was to be used by the different divisions as needed. Lt. Bunker stated that the unit was not being used a large portion of the time and was left parked at the headquarters. Recently the police department staff had decided to place the unit under the supervision of the patrol division and assign two officers to permanently staff and operate it as a POP unit. These officers were chosen based on their interest in the unit, past experience working problem oriented policing projects and their ability to work with diversified groups of people. This unit also has a city code enforcement officer assigned to work with the officers when they go into targeted

neighborhoods. The officers have been trained in nuisance abatement statutes and they work with the code enforcement officer to help neighborhoods cleanup, close down or demolish houses, buildings and apartments that do not meet requirements. They also work with the neighborhoods on other problems that are identified.

Discussion of Relevant Issues:

Since we had previously been asked by segments of our community about placing substations within their neighborhoods, we felt that this issue needed to be further addressed to find a way to comply with the desires of the community if possible. There have been Town Hall meetings, Neighborhood Watch meetings, city staff meetings, and various contacts with community service organizations and business leaders where this has been discussed. During the summer of 1995 this idea was presented at two Town Hall meetings and most of the feedback from these contacts were favorable in regards to having the ability to move a group of officers into neighborhoods and have close working relationships with the residents.

During this same time frame the concept was taken to the first line supervisors and patrol officers. They were less than enthusiastic about this use of officers since it would mean losing officers from the street. This is a valid concern and one that the police department staff had expected. For us to be able to sell the concept to the patrol officers and first line supervisors we determined that we had to show that it would be beneficial to them and not just another special unit that would further deplete the number of street officers. The concept was presented at briefings, advisory board meetings, and division

staff meetings. The idea was placed before the officers and supervisors as an effective manner in which we could dedicate the mobile substation officers to work directly with patrol officers and their supervisors to attack those problem areas in their beats that kept them occupied for so much of their time. It was explained that the unit would be used in different areas of the city and that the assigned officers would be assisting the beat officers with their specific problem areas. The mobile substation would facilitate community policing interaction by placing officers in "at risk" areas. With increased police presence in these neighborhoods, the mobile substation would assist in reducing crime and alleviating residents' fear. The presence of the substation would also instill a sense of community and serve as a deterrent to drug dealers, gang members, and others with no commitment or ties to the quality and safety of the neighborhoods. The mobile unit would allow the officers to make contact with members of the neighborhoods to determine what they perceive as the problems and needs of their neighborhood. It was even suggested that we survey the neighborhoods that the mobile unit would be going into to both before and after the visit. This information would be used to determine if the project had been successful in the eyes of the citizens. It would also help in developing new strategies on how to use the unit.

These things would help M.P.O. in meeting its goals and objectives and in the fulfillment of our mission statement to build a partnership with the community.

"We, the members of the Midland Police Department, are committed to being responsive to our community in the delivery of quality service. Recognizing our responsibility to maintain order, while affording dignity and respect to every individual, our objective is to improve the quality of life through a community partnership which promotes safe, secure neighborhoods. The values of the Midland Police Department

evolve around People, Leadership, Service and Performance" (Midland Police Department 1993).

Most officers felt that the concept would be useful if it did not turn into a showboat project that was used just for public relations promotions and special occasions. The police department staff felt that this would be the most beneficial method of utilizing the officers that were hired under the COPS AHEAD grant. This approach would allow a more intelligent and efficient use of limited resources to deal with the overload of work and provide time for more productive and preventive activities.

Another positive feature of the mobile substation was that it could be used to help provide a bridge between the differences in the philosophies of Community Oriented Policing (COP) and Problem Oriented Policing (POP). COP is police and community working together in a partnership. POP is not always a partnership; it sometimes leaves the citizen out of the solution to the problem. Our aim would be to use the mobile substation to help involve the community more so they share in the responsibility of addressing crime and disorder in the community. Officers in Dallas and Austin indicated that they got more community involvement and enthusiasm when working out of the mobile substation. These officers said the mobile substation was like a giant magnet when it drives into a neighborhood. Residents are excited about having it in their neighborhood and they are more eager to work with and accept the programs.

Another area of concern was the cost vs. benefit issue. In the past we had experienced problems with finding suitable fixed locations that we could budget. While we had a few locations that were free of rent there were usually restrictions that kept us

from being able to use the facility as we would like or we had to be willing to move from the location on short notice. We also found that we could not place personnel in some of the different areas that wanted them because of a lack of adequate facilities. It is felt by police department staff that we could possibly provide a better quality community service to more neighborhoods by the use of a mobile substation. Funding for such a project will be a formidable task to overcome. In visiting with other departments it was found that several had used Federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) monies to help fund their units. They were quick to point out to us that they were restricted in what locations they were able to use the substations because of the requirements of the CDBG program.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS:

In order to assess the need for a mobile police substation for use by the Midland Police Department it was incumbent upon us to ascertain if in fact there was a legitimate need for this type of unit and if the community and city management supported the concept. The support for the storefront or substation idea remained strong within our community as evidenced by the fact that the idea has been repeatedly brought to our attention by both citizens and individual officers over the last two years as a method to improve our relationships. When our department received funding for four officers under the COPS AHEAD Program it gave us the opportunity to re-examine our desire to incorporate the use a substation into our current COP/POP philosophy and build a community partnership that would promote safer and more secure neighborhoods. The conclusion of the police department staff was that this was the most logical method for our

department and the community to be able to benefit from a substation concept within our city. In discussions with the city council it was found that all members wanted the mobile substation to be able to be used in any area of the city and not just in certain selected areas such as would be the case if Federal CDBG money was used to help purchase the vehicle. The recommendation of the police department staff is that the City of Midland pursue the purchase of a vehicle that would serve our needs as a mobile substation and as a mobile command post. If this recommendation is approved by city management and council it will allow us to interact with different neighborhoods in ways that we have not previously been able to. It will also help us forge those necessary relationships that will ultimately make each of our city's neighborhoods safer and more secure.

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